

**Interview with John Hopkins  
conducted by Sue Kovach Shuman for the  
Providence District History Project Providence Perspective**

**Sue:** It's July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2010, I'm Sue Kovach Shuman and I am talking with John Hopkins, oh I'm sorry it's July 30<sup>th</sup> 2010 and I'm talking with John Hopkins of Fairfax - welcome. This is for the Providence Perspective History Project and we are going to talk about things here such as what brought you to the area and what your contribution as a member of the Park Authority has been. First of all how long have you lived in Fairfax County?

**John:** I've lived in Fairfax County all my life. I grew up in the Jefferson Village area of the Park Authority and attended Graham Road Elementary School, Whittier Intermediate School and the Falls Church High School where it's located now. My class was the first graduating class of Falls Church High School where the building is now.

**Sue:** What year was that?

**John:** 1971.

**Sue:** Okay.

**John:** And as I grew up I was involved in the Little League program and also in the Boy Scouts program.

**Sue:** What did you do in the Little League program?

**John:** Little League I played for the Lions and was basically an outfielder and sometimes first baseman.

**Sue:** Have you continued to play?

**John:** No that was just Little League.

**Sue:** No, that was Little League okay.

**John:** What happened was I got involved in the scouting program and ah was very active in that program. And then in high school, actually in elementary, junior high and high school I was involved in the band program as a trombonist and ah so that's where that area went; so from – so as the band activities increased then I was went from the scouting into the band and that sort of thing.

**Sue:** Are there many people that you, who you grew up with in these schools that you keep in touch with that, have stayed in the area?

**John:** Not recently, I think as far as I know I don't know anyone now.

**Sue:** What is the reunion like from the high school? Has there been any?

**John:** They did have a class reunion a high school class reunion in the seventies but I haven't been involved in that since the seventies.

**Sue:** Okay. So let's bring it up to

**John:** Okay, after high school with my background in the scouting program I decided to go into Parks and Recreation. I was able to go to college and get a degree in Parks and Rec.

**Sue:** Where was that?

**John:** At Northern Virginia Community College and received an Associate Degree in Parks and Recreation. And then in that program we did have students that were actually working for the Park Authority and we had staff that actually taught some classes at Northern Virginia Community College in the Parks and Rec program so basically that's how I was able to look at that. And also basically I started out with Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority and worked there as a seasonal which they call part time during my college years and then once I graduated then I became a seasonal employee with the Fairfax County Park Authority.

**Sue:** What does a seasonal employee do?

**John:** A seasonal employee basically is an employee that's not on full time permanent basis. When I started you could work year round, today you can only

work, you know, 11 months and then you have to take one month off, but you don't received any benefits or anything but you do receive a lot of experience and understanding of the Park Authority and your job and that sort of thing.

**Sue:** So that has changed since you started that one facet of the Park Authority.

**John:** Basically it's the same you just don't work year around.

**Sue:** Okay.

**John:** A lot of students do come in, and also anyone really a high school student after they are old enough to receive experience in the Park Authority basically at either of the waterfront sites or managed sites basically and also the Park Operations Division we use some staff too.

**Sue:** Okay. Now on July 1<sup>st</sup> you retired from the Park Authority, Fairfax County Park Authority. How many years were you there?

**John:** Ah, 35 almost 36 but basically 35 yeah.

**Sue:** What changed, what kind of jobs did you do and what kind of changes have you seen, for both good and bad?

**John:** Well when I started with the Park Authority I started at Frying Pan Park back in 74 and we were at that time we were just, actually the manager there Lowell Perney was a graduate of the Northern Virginia Community College. And so I knew him and we basically he was the first site manager there to start the park. Frying Pan Park is an equestrian center and model farm, 1920's and then it's also an equestrian center for the local pony clubs to put their shows on and practice out there at the equestrian center. Also it's the site of the annual 4-H Fair each year. And as a staff member there starting out of course I assisted with the care of the livestock; learning how to work horses, learning the farm equipment and maintaining the equestrian center with other staff too.

**Sue:** Now the equestrian center has been a constant. What kind of things are done now at the equestrian center, lessons, shows?

**John:** Well, I of course haven't been active out there you know since I was there, but I believe they do have instructors that come out and provide. The equestrian part of the park has grown quite a lot from what I understand through development and that sort of thing and also they do have the model farm and they do interpret it but they still - the annual 4-H Fair is still there, and that'll be I believe this year August 7<sup>th</sup>, second weekend in August I think.

**Sue:** So do you go there to watch the 4-H Fair?

**John:** This year, I don't know we'll see...

**Sue:** Did you participate as a child in any of this?

**John:** No.

**Sue:** Because I guess it all started right after high school right?

**John:** Yeah.

**Sue:** Okay.

**John:** Basically that part of the equestrian side and the farming side - see I grew up in Falls Church so I was a suburbanite (chuckling) and that was all new to me. On my mother's side she grew up on a farm in Ohio so it was sort of like a continent between each looking at - try to see what she learned and what she knew by taking this position there I think I learned a lot.

**Sue:** Tell me what this area was like; how much it's changed since high school this pocket of Providence District of Fairfax County.

**John:** Well again, I think that the big change growing up was the Tyson's Corner development. Before that was even there, you know, it was just basically route 7 and local farms and areas where people kept horses and that sort of thing. And then that I think that began actually what really began in the county from what I'm understanding back when Dulles Airport went in before that the Northern Virginia area was basically a large dairy operation here. And once Dulles Airport was developed then that kind of then everything changed to suburbia. I think that Dulles Airport and Tyson's Corner were the two main big developments.

**Sue:** Kind of still are.

**John:** Of course before that was even started we had of course from my understanding growing up we always shopped in Arlington for the big department stores the Hecht's and that was even before Seven Corners was developed. Then Seven Corners started that we always went to Seven Corners. But as I drive back through the neighborhood where I grew up it's basically the same. The wooded area where I use to play and all is still there.

**Sue:** Where is that exactly?

**John:** Jefferson Village.

**Sue:** Okay.

**John:** Off of Chestnut Street. But I think those developments at Dulles Airport, Tyson's Corner and then of course the large tractual properties were sold and developed into neighborhoods and that sort of thing.

**Sue:** Now the demographics of the area have changed tremendously in your lifetime in this area.

**John:** Oh yeah, yeah.

**Sue:** Um, can you talk about that at all about what changes you've seen? It's become more international perhaps?

**John:** Yes I think of course the neighborhood breakup and I think people living in the area when I grew up we had a lot of I think neighbors and people that moved down from West Virginia and from Pennsylvania, especially in the Park Authority we had a lot of older staff that came from the coal mines and that area of the country to live here so.

**Sue:** Um hum, because this is where the jobs were.

**John:** Yes right yeah. And um, they provided their input on the manual labor of maintaining the facilities and that sort of thing. And they had a lot of experience and a lot of knowledge.

**Sue:** But, at this point those people haven't stayed on.....

**John:** Yeah, I don't see that anymore in the Park Authority. I see those that are moving into the county now the different nationalities are starting to come in and work for the Park Authority, which has been good too. It's been good.

**Sue:** Well, the cultural...

**John:** The cultural differences

**Sue:** differences.

**John:** And they are very hard working people too.

**Sue:** Um tell me with your work with the Park Authority what is the one thing looking back on your career that you feel was your biggest contribution that you're proudest of for doing?

**John:** Well, the Park Authority has been my life and I feel that each of the sites that I have been assigned to over the years I've tried to learn as much as I can from the existing management that was there and then trying to adapt to what the goals and objectives were for each site and that sort of thing.

**Sue:** Give an example of one of the sites that you worked at and what you did.

**John:** Well I think in the area management side. Okay, before the area management side was involved - I started that 1993 but before that it was you were a site either assistant manager or a site manager and in my case first it was Frying Pan Park - I started there went to Lake Accotink Park as the assistant manager and then came back to Frying Pan as the manager and opened up the indoor equestrian center and I was involved in that. And in developing staff to program the activity center and then of course still maintaining the Model Farm and that sort of thing and interpreting that. Then from Frying Pan Park I was asked to go to Lake Accotink Park and there I was involved in the marine operation and what that site provides down there. Of course it's much more detailed now than when I was there back in the early eighties but over the years each site has grown and different divisions we had one division operating

basically as a business, and marine operation and then as transport over to the resource management division they do a more interpretive now than what we did. But Lake Accotink was involved in learning what a marine operation is, renting boats, you know, we had a carousel there, we had the mini golf, we had the picnicking, group picnicking rentals and that sort of thing.

**Sue:** How large a staff is there at a park - paid staff at Lake Accotink?

**John:** Accotink at my time we had the manager and assistant manager and then we had three full time maintenance staff and everyone else was on seasonal basis.

**Sue:** Um hum, has that grown over the years?

**John:** I am not sure I think they may have. I think what they've now is they may have staff that do more interpreting, they do scheduling, recreational programs and that sort of thing so I think the staff has grown.

**Sue:** Talk a little about the role of volunteers in the parks and with the Park Authority or have you had much experience working with volunteers?

**John:** The volunteers I worked with involved with involved with that were more in the park operations side of the Park Authority we didn't have much in the way of volunteers in the managed park side but on the park operations side especially at Nottoway Park working with the Friends of Nottoway Park.

**Sue:** And how long have you worked with Friends of Nottoway Park?

**John:** I think they were established within the last ten years.

**Sue:** Okay.

**John:** But we have had different groups, we've worked with the Vienna Jaycees in programming at Nottoway Park and with the haunted trail; we use to do that. And also with the Flea Markets that were there at one time and then we also had the um they had the haunted house there at one time but that was before my time. (laughing)

**Sue:** The haunted house at Hunter House before

**John:** Yeah, at Hunter House. Yeah that ended like when I started cause we couldn't do that with the managed parks section - I mean with the Park Operations side and then we had the historic rental properties office there and it just got to be where it was, it moved away from being a community center to just a rental facility for

**Sue:** For weddings and such, okay.

**John:** And then so what the volunteers and groups helped us do was the um - since we didn't have an onsite program anymore they helped us with um putting on the events the Flea Markets and we had the haunted trail back then and of course the summer concert series was the big, big benefit for the volunteers to help us do that.

**Sue:** And the concerts are still held?

**John:** Yes, oh yes in fact we had one last night. (chuckling)

**Sue:** Okay, tell me...

**John:** And then we – but ah yeah if we don't have the volunteers now for the special events it's kind of hard to do that because of the resources we work with now.

**Sue:** So resources grew from the time you started your career and now there is a cutback in process?

**John:** Well it depends. Yeah, I think there's less resources now for what we wanted - that's why we ask for donations and that sort of thing. There are corporate donations for the concert series and also this year we started - those that want to attend if they want to donate, there is a tax credit for that if they want to.

**Sue:** And what kind of donation people is it a pass the hat or something else?



**John:** We have the ah a container there at each of the, where citizens do come and they pick up a flyer or what we call we have these fans with a schedule of the concert series on there and we have a box there that they can - we have information to give them on that too.

**Sue:** Do you see the same type of people, the same people the same families coming – do you get to know these people?

**John:** Yes there is a group of yeah we do seniors, especially seniors they like to ah they come in as friends and also individuals. But yes I see them, they like the weekly schedule. It is something that they can do and come out and see it and there is no cost to them it's free. And it's a one hour concert and it's managed and put on by the Park Service Division.

**Sue:** And they actually contact the musicians. Do the musicians get paid?

**John:** Yes.

**Sue:** Okay.

**John:** Again, we went from when I was at Mason District Park we went from doing it on site and all that and now all that is handled more centralized at Headquarters.

**Sue:** Okay, um so when were you at Mason District Park? You were telling me the history of your career at Frying Pan Park like at Lake Accotink and then Mason District?

**John:** Yeah, then from Lake Accotink after I was a manager there for several years I was asked to manage Jefferson District Golf Course and

**Sue:** Are you a golfer?

**John:** Not steady, but maybe with the tournament I may get more involved in it again. But at Jefferson District Golf Course we had not only the nine hole Executive Golf Course club house operations and that sort of thing; we also had the park side which is the miniature golf which was available and the basketball courts and tennis courts.

**Sue:** And the mini golf is still sort of popular isn't it?

**John:** Yes, and it was renovated several years ago to what it is now. And ah we use to have - the change in history there was that at the Merrifield Theatres used to be a drive-in there and then it was changed over to an interior movie theatre.

**Sue:** I remember the drive-in.

**John:** We received a lot of attendants that those that wanted to go to the movies or after the movies would come and play the mini golf course and that's where we got most of our attendance (chuckling) back then.

**Sue:** And now it is still families and young people dating and things like that.

**John:** Yes and I think they do birthday parties and quite a lot of programming now to generate revenue to help support it and the staff there now.

**Sue:** So one of the differences you've seen over the years besides having tax dollars but asking the public to help or perhaps to hold a birthday party there and like you said the Park Services Division helps take care of parties and stuff so they are revenue generating arm?

**John:** Right, right yeah especially up at the marina sites and the golf courses and the rec centers they have to support themselves with the revenue that comes in.

**Sue:** And the marina is very popular at Accotink isn't it?

**John:** Oh at Lake Accotink, and Burke Lake Park

**Sue:** And at Burke Lake there's camping.

**John:** And Lake Fairfax too.

**Sue:** Okay, have you ever camped in any of the parks?

**John:** Um, when I worked at Bull Run Regional Park I camped there for the summer season (chuckling) and that saved me from driving from Centreville back to Falls Church each day, so that was um.

**Sue:** Not a bad commute but.

**John:** So I had set up a camper there and I stayed there all summer.

**Sue:** Oh! Kind of fun though.

**John:** I was a seasonal Ranger there so I was able to do that.

**Sue:** They don't have campground hosts now do they; at these parks?

**John:** Ah, well there's ah

**Sue:** Like someone who's there on site as what you did at Bull Run?

**John:** Well I'm not sure if they do or not each site is managed differently. But at Bull Run it was just very fortunate, actually the spot where I camped is now a cabin; they have a cabin there now. (chuckling) But there is camping of course at Fairfax Park Authority at Burke Lake Park and Lake Fairfax Park.

**Sue:** Yes but I wondered if maybe you had camped at any of those, could you find out for us? (Ha ha ha)

**John:** I haven't camped at any of the Park Authority sites.

**Sue:** Have you boated?

**John:** Oh yeah I've boated on Burke Lake and of course quite a lot at Lake Accotink with the water rescues we had to do and that sort of thing. People, we had canoes there and people were not used to canoes and of course they were all required to wear the life vests.

**Sue:** Did that not used to be the case?

**John:** But each day we would have to go out and help somebody that would flip it over.

**Sue:** Oh my well that's not a fond memory then.

**John:** But I think that sometimes on hot days they did it on purpose.

**Sue:** (Laughing).

**John:** But what was nice there is you could see most of the lake when I was there and if somebody were in trouble or had an issue then you know we could go out and assist them and that sort of thing.

**Sue:** Now, you said that the Park Authority was your life but obviously you are there nights and weekends and doing things on your own time too so it is not just a job to you, am I right?

**John:** Well, again with how I wanted to operate it and sure I was there most of the time I guess even on weekends. Of course we worked weekends and holidays and that sort of thing and I think by doing that it took time away from other activities that other people would do because we were involved and that when the heaviest especially on the managed sites that is the heaviest attendance. Then we always took a day or two off during the week so.

**Sue:** Think for a minute and tell me what your most pleasant or fondest memory has been career wise. Were you asked this in the last month by anyone else? No?

Just enjoying a certain park or enjoying boating or enjoying something, one incident that maybe will stick with you.

**John:** I think working; I enjoy working with volunteers and working with park staff and the volunteers and just the people in the parks. I think that talking to the citizens to come out to the parks at certain sites like at Nottoway Park we have a lot of leagues that come out, and talking to the fathers and the coaches. And just ensuring that those using the park have an enjoyable time at the site and if there's anything that they need or assistance with or information, I think that's just and then just enjoying the natural setting of the park.

**Sue:** Which park is your favorite for a natural setting to just go for a walk do you ever get tired of doing that?

**John:** I think that well I was there for a short time at Riverbend Park - but I enjoyed Riverbend walking the trail system from the Interpretive Center down to Great Falls. I think that is one of the better nice walks that you can do.

**Sue:** So it's unique how?

**John:** I think when I was at Frying Pan Park working with the livestock, working the team of horses I was learning that - the learning part of the career I think is very important to me. I never worked horses before; when I finished there I could work horses (chuckling) attempt to work horses anyway using the equipment that planted and harvested the crops, and learning that and I thought

**Sue:** Are you?

**John:** And learning the interpretive part of the farm and the blacksmith shop side and then the giving we gave tours there when I was there too and loving that aspect.

**Sue:** You gave tours?

**John:** Oh yeah, right, of the farm and the blacksmith shop back when I was at the site.

**Sue:** So at the very beginning?

**John:** And then I think over the years again another thing that I enjoy is seeing staff members develop themselves from a lot of times starting out as seasonals and turning their work into careers like I have. And how they developed and what they've learned and what they could bring to the Park Authority and to the county itself I thought was enjoyable.

**Sue:** Have you spoken to other groups at Northern Virginia Community College or other areas that have a Parks and Recreation major because it sounds like you have.

**John:** I haven't been asked to but we've had interns that come out occasionally from college and they ask us to talk to them and yeah, if I remember I think it was

at least a couple of time I have had interns that they've ask questions and we've provided them information.

**Sue:** And some of them then went on and worked for the Park Authority right?

**John:** I think so yeah right. Well at least not Park Authority but others they stayed with them. But I remember seasonals that started out with the Park Authority and became full time and now they are within the sending messenger of the Deputy Director of the Park Authority started out and it's a family definitely a family the Park Authority is a family and we kind of look out for each other. (chuckling)

**Sue:** Now what kind of things in the area have you seen change, like traffic or something like that that you wish could be improved. Not just the Park Authority but you know anywhere what would help maintain the quality of life a high quality of life here?

**John:** I don't know it's well of course when it comes to traffic and that sort of thing it's whatever I guess.

I think I'm kind of fortunate growing up in this area I kind of know how if there is a bottleneck in one spot I've got three or four different decisions to make to go different ways so but those that just move into the area I think they are kind of locked into the 66 or the 495 corridor.

Where I think in my case I have different options I can go different ways if I notice this is blocked up or whatever because I know the area. Of course with the increase in the area with the population and that sort of thing, definitely I know there are some budget issues now but as you drive anywhere you'll notice that the roads are not in the best of shape. When I grew up the median strips were mowed everything was mowed, roads were maintained. Right now it's we are in a holding pattern here now for a few years.

**Sue:** So you don't like that natural look huh? **John:** Well it's just a, it depends if it blocks where you can't see the traffic coming the other way then there's a safety issue there. They don't have to mow every area I think there was a nice program

there at one time and I still think it is going where they do plant flowers in the median strips and that sort of thing.

**Sue:** Wildflowers?

**John:** I see that in Oakton and other areas. I think that was a good decision on someone's part that came up with that. But again there is times when I think we just have to get through this downturn and hopefully get back to maintaining the roads as we use to – potholes and that sort of thing.

**Sue:** Do you see signs that the downturn is ending?

**John:** Not yet no.

**Sue:** Okay, and why is that?

**John:** I just don't see the improvement yet, that's all. At least I – that's why one of the reasons why I'm continuing, I'm starting to volunteer too is to help with that.

**Sue:** What are you doing?

**John:** With the Nottoway Nights program with the programing at Nottoway Park at least that is right off hand. And then the IMA program in the Park Authority which is the program where they come in and they take a portion of the park and they develop a management area to remove invasive plants and that sort of thing.

**Sue:** And what is that called again?

**John:** IMA Invasive Management Area.

**Sue:** Okay.

**John:** It's the program.

**Sue:** Okay.

**John:** And that's managed by the Resource Management Division.

**Sue:** There is not lack of things to volunteer for.

**John:** Yeah, right and there is...

**Sue:** And you were telling me before I turned the tape recorder on that you retired after how many years?

**John:** 35 years.

**Sue:** 35, okay and you retired because of consolidation.

**John:** Yes, my position was eliminated. I was offered another position but after weeks of thought I decided that this would be the best time to retire and then go from there. (chuckling)

**Sue:** Okay. Anything else you want to tell me that I have not asked that you would like to talk about here?

**John:** At ah another highlight of my life I think is talking to Fred Crabtree and knowing him with the Vienna Little League Program at Nottoway Park. He is an excellent individual to be able to know and that sort of thing. Others at the park over my career I could name quite a few, Jim Heberline one of our Directors was a fine gentleman and my supervisors over the years. Bill Helwig - Lake Accotink others over the years, he was the first manager to hire me as full time. Lowell Perney was the first manager hiring me at Frying Pan Park. I learned a lot from those and then at headquarters, Wayne Cochrill he was our immediate supervisors as managers at one time and there's quite a few that I can remember.

**Sue:** And you say the Park Authority is a family and you are naming these people.

**John:** Yes, most of them are retired and gone now, but those were the, well there are quite a few others but those were some of the individuals that provided you guidance and you know cause they really enjoyed working in the Park Authority too. Especially Jim Heberline he started in the mid 1960's I understand and retired in the 1990s.

**Sue:** When you were just a little kid yes.

**John:** Yeah he started out from my understanding the story about him is that he started out at well one of his first sites I guess was Riverbend Park and that was



before they even developed anything up there. And they had a small marina there and some boats that they put out. There was no buildings or anything only a small trailer. I understand he lived there, for I don't know how long he was there but he used the river to wash in and that sort of thing.

**Sue:** Well, that was kind of camping like what you did at Bull Run.

**John:** But yeah, he was very good for the Park Authority. He worked his way up, he managed Lake Fairfax Park and then became a Division Manager, and then Deputy Director and then became Director so.

**Sue:** So all these people have been influential.

**John:** So you can see everybody you know where they wanted to go in life in their career I guess. Those that stay in the field like I did or those that go to headquarters, you know you can see the difference.

**Sue:** What advice would you give to the young person who wants to get into the Parks and Recreation in this area?

**John:** Well I think I would highly recommend it especially if you do like the outdoors and want to contribute to the community in a positive manner. It's basically a job that's positive; you do work for the public and the public has certain needs and wants and that sort of thing and just try to explain if they want something right today this is what we have to do to make it what they would like. And ensure that when they do come to the park that the park facilities are at the standard of where we want them as a management standard and that sort of thing; in the way of safe and clean and that sort of thing and operational.

**Sue:** If there was one park thing right now that you could change that perhaps for budget reasons you couldn't what would that be that one park one smaller item one thing.

**John:** Well we do have - in the Park Authority we have facilities that were developed in the seventies and you know we are talking 30 plus years down the road and we at certain sites you just have to start taking your infrastructure and budget and hopefully improve that to the standard at least to when it was built or

better. We are running through that right now especially the roadways and the parking lots and that sort of thing. We've had some funding from - for ADA (American Disabilities Act) improvements from the Federal Government. There have been some improvements especially at Nottoway Park and other sites for that and that also includes the buildings, and the walkways and then the parking lots for the parking and that sort of thing. But I think I believe we should look at especially with the county facilities and the Park Authority facilities look at the infrastructure to start putting money back into it for bringing up to standards so they are safe and operational.

**Sue:** Okay, thank you very much.